



# Re-framing the prostitute identity in Zimbabwe: An approach to Virginia Phiri's novel *Highway queen* (2010)

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**Dates:**  
Received: 22 Jan. 2014  
Accepted: 11 Mar. 2015  
Published: 15 June 2015

**How to cite this article:**  
Nyambi, O., 2015,  
'Re-framing the prostitute  
identity in Zimbabwe: An  
approach to Virginia Phiri's  
novel *Highway queen* (2010)',  
*Literator* 36(1), Art. #1105,  
10 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/lit.v36i1.1105>

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In Zimbabwe, as in most traditionally conservative, patriarchal and Christian dominated countries, female sex work is abhorred on moral grounds as an unbecoming means of livelihood which takes away the practising woman's social respectability. In such societies, then, the moral threat and stigma associated with female sex work affect women's decisions on whether or not to take up sex work as a permanent means of livelihood. One can, however, ask how sustainable and stable these patriarchally constructed notions of morality and female-identity are, especially in the face of crises? This article uses Virginia Phiri's novel *Highway queen*, which is set in one of Zimbabwe's economically tumultuous eras, to demonstrate how cultural texts grapple with the discourse of female sex work in contemporary Zimbabwe. The gist of my argument is that dominant prostitute identity constructs shaped by Zimbabwe's patriarchal social and economic system are unstable. I find that the novel *Highway queen* manipulates such instability not only to re-inscribe sex work as a product of patriarchal impairment of female agency but, perhaps more importantly, to reflect on how women who are forced by circumstances to become sex workers can rise above their passive victimhood to achieve personal goals despite the social odds charted by patriarchy. Zooming in on the representation of the daily experiences of the female sex worker and protagonist, Sophie, the article explores the various ways in which the novel deconstructs stereotypical perceptions of female sex work and sex workers. The analysis ends with the argument that, whilst Sophie's situation is fundamentally tragic, it affectively appeals to our sense of morality in a way which destabilises dominant (patriarchal) constructs of sex work.

**Die herformulering van die prostituut-identiteit in Zimbabwe: 'n Benadering tot Virginia Phiri se roman *Highway koningin* (2010).** Soos in die meeste tradisioneel konserwatiewe en patriargale lande waar die Christendom dominant is, word vroue se sekswerk in Zimbabwe op morele gronde verfoei as 'n onaanvaarbare manier om 'n inkomste te bekom. Dit word beskou as iets wat so 'n vrou se sosiale eerbaarheid tot niet maak. In sulke gemeenskappe beïnvloed die morele dreigement en stigma wat met vroue se sekswerk geassosieer word dus vroue se besluite rakende sekswerk as 'n permanente manier om 'n inkomste te verdien. Die vraag is hoe volhoubaar en stabiel sulke patriargaal-gekonstrueerde idees aangaande moraliteit en vroulike identiteit is, gegewe ekonomiese krisis-toestande? Hierdie artikel gebruik Virginia Phiri se roman *Highway queen*, wat teen die agtergrond van een van Zimbabwe se ekonomiese krisistye afspeel, ten einde uit te wys hoedat kulturele tekste probeer om met die diskoers van vroulike sekswerk om te gaan. Die kern van my argument is dat dominante konstruksies van prostituut-identiteite soos gevorm deur Zimbabwe se huidige diep patriargale kultuur en sosio-politieke en ekonomiese sisteem onstabiel is en dat die roman *Highway queen* hierdie onstabieliteit manipuleer ten einde sekswerk as 'n produk van die patriargale inkorting van die handelingsbevoegdheid van vroue te herdefinieer. Belangriker nog, die roman besin oor hoe vroue hulle persoonlike doelwitte kan bereik ten spyte van die ongelyke kansen wat die patriargie vir hulle skep. Deur middel van 'n fokus op die weergee van die alledaagse ervarings van die vroulike sekswerker en protagonis, Sophie, ontleed hierdie artikel die verskillende maniere waarop die roman stereotipiese persepsies van vroulike seks-werk dekonstrueer. Ten slotte betoog ek dat, hoewel Sophie se situasie diep tragies is, dit emosioneel inwerk op ons sin vir moraliteit op 'n wyse wat dominante (patriargale) konstruksies van sekswerk destabiliseer.

## Introduction

During the preceding decade in Zimbabwe, which was characterised by a burgeoning and increasingly thriving opposition and civic-society culture (despite the legislated discouragement of dissident expression and assembly),<sup>1</sup> fiction offered an interesting space for women to express

<sup>1</sup>I am referring to the *Public Order and Security Act of 2002* which prohibits unauthorised assembly and demonstrations whilst the *Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act of 2003* forbids certain types of access and the publication of certain information.



their subjectivities in the relatively safe confines of literary narratives. Yvonne Vera, one of Zimbabwe's best-known female writers, has commented on the window of opportunity presented by the cultural sphere for subordinated women to influence public opinion. Vera (1999) argues as follows:

If speaking is still difficult to negotiate, then writing has created a free space for most women – much freer than speech ... The book is bound, circulated, read. It retains its autonomy much more than a woman is allowed in the oral situation. (p. 3)

This article explores how a fictional text (*Highway queen* by Virginia Phiri) harnesses the expressive function of fiction highlighted by Vera above to attempt a reconfiguration of one of the most notorious female-identity constructs cum professions in Zimbabwe – prostitution. The study focuses on the transformation of Phiri's heroine from a 'respectably' married woman who identifies with mainstream female-identity constructs into a sex worker who is torn between her inner sense of the immorality of sex work and her realisation that it is the only viable means of survival available to her.

*Highway queen* is one of Phiri's texts in a unique and sizable oeuvre of literature in English which engages with social, economic and cultural issues from a feminist, and particularly prostitute's, point of view. Although compared to her contemporaries such as Petina Gappah, Valerie Tagwira, NoViolet Bulawayo her works have suffered critical neglect, Phiri has managed to catch some literary limelight with her distinctive and constant fascination with prostitute heroines. In a largely Christian and conservative country such as Zimbabwe, Phiri's sympathetic depiction of sex workers and sex work negatively affects the reception of her texts. The fact that Phiri lives, writes and publishes in Zimbabwe, unlike many of her popular and foreign-based peers such as Gappah, Bulawayo and Tagwira, may also mean that her locally published work has a limited exposure to wider audiences. Phiri's other texts such as *Desperate* (a collection of interconnected short stories to which *Highway queen* is a sequel) grapple with the economic, moral and health dimensions of prostitution albeit mostly in what appear to be colonial and pre-2000 settings. According to Phiri (2010:4), *Highway queen* was conceived to address some '... unfinished business in [her] first book *Desperate*'. A cursory comparative reading of *Highway queen* and *Desperate* reveals their thematic unity and establishes *Highway queen* as almost the same story related in *Desperate* but this time unravelling in a crisis setting reminiscent of the post-2000 period in Zimbabwe.

## Synopsis: Untenable male privilege

*Highway Queen* complexly engages with the subject of the morality of female sex work in a context in which Zimbabwe is in crisis. The novel traces the life and experiences of a female sex worker, Sophie, from the moment she is forced by economic circumstances to abandon her socially 'acceptable' identity and role as a wife to moments of her life when she desperately ventures into the culturally despised sex work occupation in order to save herself and her family from an imploding economy. The first two chapters entitled

'Wake up call' and 'Sink or swim', respectively, offer a contextual, and sociological, background to the situation shaped by the unfolding crisis, particularly illuminating the emerging excruciating situations faced by women who are inadvertently thrust into breadwinning roles. The first two chapters also present the earliest hint of the novel's radical feminism – not only the evocation of the male world, epitomised by the protagonist Sophie's husband Steven, as imploding in the face of the crisis but also the portrayal of the female prostitute figure's desperate sacrifices in the breadwinning role as deserving recognition and respect. The novel begins with the tragic fall of the 'man of the house', Steven, through retrenchment as the national economic cataclysm worsens. Already, the economic and sociological situation is mapped, illuminating the socio-economic odds that Sophie must surmount in order to negotiate the emergent national and familial crisis. The gendered role and power hierarchies marking the familial hegemony are evoked as exposing women such as Sophie to the vagaries of the crisis when the male breadwinner is suddenly retrenched and is not able to perform his roles.

Inscribed in improvising strategies adopted by Steven's hitherto dependants is a subtle exposure of an untenable male privilege embodied by Steven. Patriarchy's tendency to subordinate and infringe the mother figure through centralising familial power and breadwinning is portrayed as underlying Steven's dependants', namely Sophie, the children and Steven's mother, unpreparedness to deal with his sudden incapacitation. In a patriarchal social and economic set-up where breadwinning is often synonymous with male identity, Steven's failure to provide monetary and material support to his family disillusioned him, forcing him into a life of perpetual alcoholism. It is, then, not a coincidence that, after his retrenchment, Steven's alcoholism only starts when, due to the scarcity of jobs caused by the economic collapse, he is forced to take up a menial job as a kitchen hand at a sports club. The kitchen, with its stereotypical mark as a symbol of women's domesticity and inferiority, emerges as a symbolic space that, in a patriarchal sense, marginalises all who are associated with it.

Notwithstanding the gains made in female empowerment in the education, economic and political sectors in Zimbabwe and the intersectionalist view that women's socio-economic and political problems are multi-layered, *Highway queen* presents the post-2000 Zimbabwean woman's problem as essentially the deeply-rooted patriarchal culture. At the heart of patriarchy's defence-mechanism and sustenance is what *Highway queen* aesthetically reveals as a calculated marginalisation of women through their discouragement, incapacitation and impairment to self-sustain. The retrogressive dimensions of this patriarchal social structure can be felt early in the first chapter, which is aptly titled 'Wake up call.' The economic crisis is the apparent 'wake-up call' (Phiri 2010:7). However, implied in this chapter title are two forms of 'waking up' (Phiri 2010) that are connected: firstly, to the events and circumstances following Steven's retrenchment and, secondly, to the novel's overarching



feminist re-inscription of female sex work in crisis contexts as a high form of sacrifice and Sophie as a 'sheroine' (Phiri's word).<sup>2</sup> The nexus of Steven's sudden retrenchment and consequent inability to provide for the family is evoked as life-shattering for his family. Whilst the story only starts when patriarchy, as the determiner of the familial and social 'places' of men and women, and Steven's privileged role as the breadwinner and family head are already waning, patriarchy is evoked as pervading all forms of social-identity formations, often to the detriment of those it has subordinated, especially women and children. More tragic, however, is not only the financial gap caused by the absence of a family breadwinner but Sophie's unpreparedness to immediately replace Steven in the role. As the economic implosion intensifies, Sophie runs out of 'moral' means of fending for the family and is forced to take up sex work as a way out. The rest of the narrative focalises Sophie's experiences as a sex worker, particularly highlighting in a powerfully evocative way the health and personal risks involved in the work. Sophie's male clientele is also profiled but only in so far as this illuminates and justifies Sophie's decision to take up sex work as a desperate means to survive.

I invoke Maria Pia Lara's (1998) theorisation on the disclosive potential of feminist narratives to reflect on the novel's representation of female sex workers in the context of Zimbabwe's economic crisis at the turn of the century,<sup>3</sup> paying particular attention to the various ways through which the (evoked) prevailing economic crisis impacts on the social and individual construction and reconstruction of female sex work. Whilst *Highway queen* can be read as sympathetic to a practice and practitioners socially and culturally held to be deviant, my analysis focuses rather on the evocation of sex work that proffers new perspectives on sex workers and their practice, especially in the context of the broader political, social and economic contexts that inhibit the development and flourishing of female subjectivities. Lara (1998) understands language to be a potentially performative means of contesting one's oppression:

I conceive of language as an internal mediation of action, and more precisely, as an intervention by means of which agents take the initiative to introduce new meanings into the public sphere. (p. 68)

In this sense, language is considered to be endowed with a disclosive potential that can influence and change prior perceptions. On the importance of this 'disclosive' effect, Lara (1998) makes the following argument:

The aesthetic effect of disclosure can provide a new way of understanding justice. Once a story is retold, it is possible to grasp the narrowness of previous conceptions of justice, debts to the past that take the form of moral responsibilities in the present are thereby incurred. (pp. 5–6)

2. In an interview with Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro (2013), Phiri uses the term 'sheroines' in reference to sex workers who helped her during Zimbabwe's liberation war. In the same interview, Phiri praises sex workers who sacrifice their health and choices in order to survive.

3. The so-called Zimbabwe crisis is roughly dated from 2000–2009. The major facets of this crisis that have a bearing on this article's focus are the dwindling job market and the chronic shortages of basic consumer goods.

Lara's (1998) theoretical delineation of feminist narratives in the public sphere as morally-textured asseverates the socially transformative potential of linguistic expression.

A more incisive and relevant – for my current approach to *Highway queen* – conception of female sex work is proffered by Janet Maia Wojcicki (2002:340) who, in her study of prostitution in Johannesburg's Hillbrow area, presents the concept of 'ukuphanda', a Zulu verb loosely meaning 'to try to get money'. As in its Northern Ndebele<sup>4</sup> form, the word 'ukuphanda' carries positive connotations of desperate survivalist strategies, as we see with the prostitute figure in *Highway queen*, in which people would not engage under normal circumstances. My approach to *Highway queen*'s critique of, and attempts to change, dominant patriarchal codes guiding the prostitute identity formation is focused on the novel's unusual prostitute-centred narrative style. I view the prostitute's perspective employed in the narrative as enhancing the novel's aesthetic and cognitive impact, that is, the narrative's power of affect which enables the novel to influence the reading public toward awareness or knowledge of the danger of patriarchally constructed sexual identities to women (especially) in crises. Invoking Lara's inference that language is inherently disclosive, I read *Highway queen*'s first-person (prostitute) narrative as not only well placed to foreground a demythologising consciousness of patriarchal codes guiding individual and public identity constructions but, perhaps more importantly, as adding affect to the narrative's impact. This affect, conjured up by Sophie's desperate commodification and offering her body up for male appropriation, has the potential of emotionally guiding readers to rethink previous, especially patriarchal, conceptions of female sex workers and sex work.

Phiri's depiction of the female prostitute figure as the chronicler of her own life not only gives the prostitute figure voice and agency to reflect on the nature of her subalternity, but it can be read on a symbolic plane as foregrounding the prostitute's capacity to reconfigure normative identities of female sex work and sex workers. The prostitute figure can therefore be viewed as utilising the aesthetic force of self-representation to seek 'recognition and solidarity' (Lara 1998:2) about the injustice of female-constraining and socially-produced gender and sexual identities. In *Highway queen*, Phiri not only portrays a woman's struggle to re-negotiate hegemonic forms of social-identity amid a debilitating economic crisis which leaves prostitution as the only escape route, but she powerfully attempts to challenge denigrating perceptions of prostitution and female prostitutes inscribed in hegemonic cultural, social and religious discourses. The novel invokes the extraordinary circumstances caused by the crisis, which expose the dangerous limits of socially-produced and regulated female identities, to advance a re-conceptualisation of prostitution and prostitute identity formation, especially under conditions of economic crisis.

4. An Nguni language spoken in Matabeleland and the Midlands provinces of Zimbabwe.



## Prostitute narrative as morally-textured

*Highway queen's* discursive potential to transform the reading public's prior conceptions of prostitutes and prostitution is enhanced by its styling as a prostitute-centred narrative that creates in readers the impression that they are experiencing, first hand, a prostitute's story of self-redemption based on her personal experiences. The potential of the experiential narratives of previously suppressed women to usher into the public sphere uniquely feminist issues is akin to what Walter Benjamin calls '... a concept of knowledge to which a concept of experience corresponds' (in Lewis, Rodgers & Woolcock 2008:2). It is this unique, experiential dimension of women's narratives that heightens their cognitive and moral appeal. For Irene Kacandes (2001), this cognitive effect, which can lead to solidarity, can be explained in terms of the relationship between reader and narrative. Kacandes (2001:135) views the reader as the 'enabler' of the narrative, whose level of interest or readiness to participate in the process of 'narrative witnessing' (Kacandes 2001) either heightens or distracts from the narrative's therapeutic intentions as she indicates:

This reader, as enabler of the text, bears witness to the crimes, though her completion of the process cannot be said to aid the original victims ... despite the lack of any psychotherapeutic healing, I follow Herman, Caruth, Minow, and others in believing that there is societal benefit to such narrative witnessing. (p. 135)

Kacandes's notion of 'narrative witnessing' is important to my present reading of *Highway queen* as inherently emancipatory and in league with other social and political movements fighting for social justice. As in Gregory Currie's (2010:98) notion of 'guided attention', 'narrative witnessing' (Kacandes 2001:135) in feminist literary narratives involves the deep psychological immersion of the reader in the narrative's life-world of women's gender-induced suffering. The reader's absorption into the fictional life-world of the carefully designed plot, characters and action where the effects of Sophie's gender-induced predicaments are affectively rendered can alert the reader to new perceptions of the social consequences of gender imbalances. The novel's plot structure, for instance, avoids the 'traditional' linear movement from exposition through to the resolution. Instead, it displays multiple moments of tension and turning points characterised by Sophie's intensifying desperation and her steadfast fighting spirit. The worsening desperation and risks attendant on each of these turning points, mostly involving Sophie's precarious ordeals in her sex selling work, characterise Sophie, especially in contradistinction to her loafing, impotent, and drunkard husband, as a selfless and feisty woman who deserves our sympathy and admiration. Concomitantly, sympathy for Sophie would entail a covert indictment of the system that produced her, that is, patriarchy.

The portrayal of Sophie as a double victim of two historically recognisable forces, the post-2000 economic implosion and the patriarchal system, makes the decoding of her desperation and choices easier. If, as Keen (2007:iii) argues in a general context, '... readers' empathy for situations depicted in

fiction may be enhanced by chance relevance to particular historical, economic, cultural or social circumstances', then the readers' exposure to or knowledge of the post-2000 Zimbabwean economic crisis can be viewed as facilitating narrative empathy in *Highway queen*. This means that the readers' feeling with Sophie's desperation in the fictional life-world is informed by their awareness of correlating circumstances in the real life-world. This empathy may not be automatic or spontaneous for all readers, and its likelihood depends on the extent to which the narrative is able to facilitate character identification. In *Highway queen*, chances for character identification and the possibility of a consequent spontaneous sharing of affect between the reader and Sophie are enhanced by the narrative's focalisation of Sophie's undeserved distress.

The aesthetically affective nature of the prostitute narrative point of view can be linked to Phiri's other texts, especially the short story 'Ndangariro Dzepfambi' (literally translating into 'prostitutes' memoirs') in the short story anthology *Masimba* (2004) edited by Chiedza Musengezi, who has served as the director of the Zimbabwe Women Writers Association. In 'Ndangariro Dzepfambi', as in *Desperate* and *Highway queen*, Phiri creates female prostitute protagonists whose internal thoughts open for the reader their 'true' feelings and perspectives about their identity and their attempts to 'disidentify'<sup>5</sup> with dangerous orthodox gender stereotypes and to identity constructions that dissuade them from resorting to socially condemned means of survival such as sex selling when the socially approved ones have proved to be unfeasible. To these female protagonists, as with Sophie in *Highway queen*, sex selling is not a mere expression of agency to chart their destinies outside socially 'acceptable' modes of survival but a bold undertaking to avert potentially fatal consequences associated with mainstream rules of social conduct.

In *Highway queen* as in Valerie Tagwira's (2008) short story 'Mainini Grace's promise',<sup>6</sup> prostitutes' identity formation is portrayed as a consequence of limitations placed on female subjectivity by social and cultural norms. In *Highway queen*, we do not only read a story about a prostitute caught up in an economic crisis moment. The narrative style favours, through focalisation, the prostitute angle and immerses us in the life-world of the prostitute's ego, in the Freudian sense of her conscious, rational mind. It is from this focalisation that our knowledge and conceptions of prostitution and prostitutes, as shaped by hegemonic cultural and social discourses (what Freud would call the 'superego' or social conscience), are exposed, challenged and possibly replaced. The prostitute's discourse becomes a discursive discourse that not only assumes a complex epistemological dimension but also

5.The concept of 'identification' was developed by Shannon Bell (1994:14) to theorise how '... subjects assume the identities set up in the dominant discourses.' I also refer to Bell's (1994:14) related concept of 'disidentification', which according to her, involves '... the process in which the identities set up in the dominant ideology, rather than being merely countered, are perverted and displaced through the inscription of unexpected new meanings.'

6.The short story is part of a short-story anthology *Women writing Zimbabwe* (2003) [2008 in reference list], edited by Irene Staunton.



potentially generates solidarity for the protagonist as she takes up sex work in order to survive. This epistemological aspect to the prostitute's discourse is enhanced by the highly imaginative nature of its delivery. In her conceptualisation of feminist narratives as 'morally textured', Lara (1998:3) argues that '... the possibility of engaging others through a powerful dialogue conceives of language as possessing a disclosive capacity.' In this light, what readers can potentially learn about sex work and sex workers depends on the prostitute discourse's capacity to appeal to their ways of seeing and making sense of sex work and sex workers. As alluded to above, the potential of *Highway queen* to appeal to readers lies in the novel's internal focalisation, that is, the highly affective evocation of Sophie's subjective perception of the incompatibility of normative forms of economic survival with her pressing economic and familial crises. The propositional knowledge of the potentially tragic nature of these patriarchal codes defining acceptable and unacceptable means of survival in *Highway queen* is enhanced by the novel's use of the first-person narrator as the following paragraphs will show.

The experience of being 'inside' Sophie's head produced by the first-person pronoun 'I' can produce a connection between the reader and the narrative, thereby enhancing the chances of the reader getting very close to Sophie's thought patterns and feelings. This can heighten the possibility of emotional attachment with her. A passage in which Sophie reflects on the moral issues around her sex selling practice can reveal the potential in the narrative, not only to stir the readers' emotions to sympathise with Sophie but also to suspect their preceding perceptions of sex work and sex workers:

Sex workers also started hanging out at Tickie's where it was easy to get customers. There was no way I would have done that, I had to be discreet. I was so sure that Tickie, Dave and Josphat had no idea that I sold sex. Everyone including the camp residents believed that I earned money through batiks or working as a casual labourer in neighbouring farms. The increase of sex workers on the highway impacted on my earnings ... I discussed with Steven the possibility of going back to the border to sell batiks. There I earned good money and could hide my sex selling. (Phiri 2010:157)

This quotation reveals Sophie's determination to continue selling sex despite her strong aversion to the practice. However, the passage's first-person perspective allows it to surreptitiously reflect on the moral issues around her sex work in a way that can influence us to question dominant cultural constructions and sweeping generalisations about sex work and sex workers. The first-person narrative creates the impression that Sophie is actually sitting next to us, narrating her story with a contrite tone that reveals her desperation and antipathy for a practice that circumstances have forced on her. The resultant immersion of readers into Sophie's narrative of her private and public lives allows them to comprehend Sophie's alternative identity (as a sex worker) as informed observers. In light of Lara's (1998:41) assertion that '... stories shape our views, capturing, at the same time, the uniqueness of each being ...', we can view our narrative

immersion into Sophie's sex work world as privileging us to infer both the unique dynamics of her practice and the context of the guilty conscience which force her to conceal her sex worker identity.

The experiential quality of Sophie's narrative endows her arguments with a sense of discursive subjectivity and authority concerning sex workers and sex work. Sophie's prostitute discourse unfolds in the form of narrated lived experience in which the personal, in the sense of Patricia Waugh's (1989:36) notion of 'the realm of feeling', becomes a teleological expression of the political which is, according to Waugh's (1989:36) definition, '... the realm of reason and action'. As hinted above, from the beginning of the novel, Sophie is portrayed as demonstrating an unwavering sense of sexual and social morality. The events and circumstances in the plot are not only subjectively and conveniently selected to reflect and reinforce her inner sense of morality but, more importantly, to expose the incompatibility of her chastity with the prevailing economic demands. Construed in the context of the ingrained social and cultural censure of sex work (see Chitando 2011), this conflict between Sophie's private 'good-wife' self and her public prostitute self, though hidden from her immediate family and friends, creates in the reader a fascination with the forces behind her inevitably fractured identity. The prostitute's narrative entails sustaining readers' captivation, in Maureen Whitebrook's (2001:11) sense of narrative as '... involv[ing] both the organisation of events, story, and the process of organisation, narration'. This narrative reflects her daily struggles as a reluctant sex worker, allowing her to reflect on circumstances that force her to commodify her body. The nature of Sophie's 'narrative identity' (Whitebrook 2001:10) is such that her '... inside story that she convey[s] to [us]' (Whitebrook 2001) makes her evolving subjectivity an inside-out story of lived experience which leads us, at the end of the novel, to an 'outside-in' (Whitebrook 2001) evaluation of her acquired prostitute identity as informed 'judges'. As alluded to in my discussion of the quotation above, the first-person narrative's shrinking of the perspectival distance between the narrator (Sophie) and the reader enhances this process of newly knowing Sophie, that is, a new perception of the justice, and even morality, of her sex worker self.

As Lara (1998:35) asserts, '... storytelling [is] an identity project'. Being the author of the story of her life, Sophie in her narrative carefully selects desperate moments in her life that 'disclose', in Lara's (1998:4) sense of narrative disclosure as capable of 'providing new meanings', her acquired prostitute identity. Through her interior monologues, we as readers encounter her true conscience, which clarifies the discrepancy between her personal and public identities. To this effect, the timing of Steven's retrenchment and his consequent 'resignation' from his role as the family's breadwinner and Sophie's resultant desperation are intricately bound up with her identity shift. In contrast to her husband's depiction, from the moment that he loses his job, as an irrationally irresponsible and egocentric man who resorts to alcohol whilst



his family is mired in crisis, Sophie strikes us as a practical, selfless and long-suffering woman. Unlike Steven, she is prepared to compromise on critical aspects of her being – her sexual identity and health – for both her own livelihood and the sake of her endangered family. As her husband abandons his breadwinning role and because of his abuse of alcohol glides into total ineptitude, which is aggravated by the frustration and embarrassment caused by his emasculation, Sophie's significance to the family increases, bolstered by her strong sense of familial duty which drives her into sex work as an answer to the crisis. Steven is depicted as not only '... no longer capable of giving [Sophie] meaningful ideas [as he has] been taken over by *kachasu*'<sup>7</sup> (Phiri 2010:11) but also as an impediment to the family's daily efforts to survive as he steals proceeds from Sophie's vending business to indulge in alcohol. Steven's arrogance in the face of a real threat to his family's livelihood sinks him, in the family hierarchy based on productivity, even lower than his two children – who drop out of school to work as part-time babysitters – and his mother – a diabetic patient who defies old age and ailment to keep a vegetable and edible tubers plot.

Sophie's dedicated and self-sacrificing character in her new breadwinning role is constantly juxtaposed with Steven's ineptitude as a father figure in a way that strips him of his patriarchally assigned role as the family leader or breadwinner, and the attendant honour, and effectively bestows it on Sophie. This rise in the sex worker's familial influence can be inferred from Sophie's firming confidence in taking decisions when Steven seems to fade away into the domestic space usually occupied by women and girls. For instance, when Sophie decides to go and buy merchandise for sale at the Beit Bridge border post, she tells Samson, the driver of a truck she intends to hitchhike to Beit Bridge, that she cannot just take off without making arrangements for her family, including Steven, to survive in her absence because 'You see, I [Sophie] am the breadwinner' (Phiri 2010:23). When she finally makes up her mind to go to Beit Bridge with Samson, she writes Steven a note that is telling of her emergent prominence and Steven's obscurity in the family set-up (Phiri 2010):

Steven Dear,  
I have gone to the South Border town to find goods to sell. I will be back tomorrow. Please look after the children. Make sure that mother takes her medication. See you soon.  
Love, Sophie. (p. 23)

Whilst this note may on the face of it reflect Sophie's respect for Steven to the extent that she feels that she cannot go without informing him, when read in the context of the patriarchal culture's gendered role and familial power configurations, the note can be viewed as covertly implying a disruption of Steven's patriarchal power and familial influence. In a strictly patriarchal sense, Sophie would have first secured Steven's consent for her to go to Beit Bridge; yet she goes without his approval. This surreptitiously suggests the prominence of the breadwinning act, and indeed the means of its achievement

7. *Kachasu* is an illegal brew with a very high alcohol content.

– sex work – for that is what Sophie ends up doing in Beit Bridge, over the patriarchal procedure. However, it is the statement 'Please look after the children' (Phiri 2010:23) that, in the patriarchal sense, would indicate the fall of patriarchy and the rise of matriarchy in the familial power structure. Read in the context of patriarchy's strategic, to its sustenance, confinement of women to the domestic space<sup>8</sup> where 'look[ing] after the children' is a typical chore, this role would seem to reflect Steven's emergent subordination, if not effeminisation. Steven becomes a foil to Sophie, whose rise in the familial rank not only occurs against the backdrop of her new role as the family's breadwinner but as a consequence of the immense sacrifice required from her to 'disidentify' from normative modes of livelihood, that is, to become a sex worker.

Sophie's descriptions of her first (and subsequent) acts of sex selling do not only reflect the desperation that informs her decision to sell sex but also illuminate the tensions inhabiting her unstable identity, manifesting in the constant conflict between her inner, socially 'correct' wife identity and her outer, crisis-conditioned sex worker identity. When Dhuri, the cross-border truck driver who sells scarce basic commodities that Sophie intends to repackage and resale, announces his desire to be paid by sex, she describes herself as 'shattered' (Phiri 2010:19), and the impromptu answer she gives is that she is a married woman. Thus at this point, Sophie's identification with the married woman identity can be seen to limit her options for survival. In her first sex sale, Sophie portrays herself as embroiled in a do or die (essentially, a be-a-prostitute-or-die) situation in which her and her family's very livelihood is predicated on her sexual 'immoralisation'. The difficult options that Dhuri and all of Sophie's subsequent male clients give her, either to protect her social-identity and die of hunger or to lose her socially 'acceptable' morality and survive, demonstrate the extent of her entrapment and validate her eventual decision to form an alternative sex worker identity that thrives alongside her inner, normative married woman identity. When read in the context of her precarious financial position, Sophie's decision to become a sex worker effectively obscures the morality line between her newly acquired sex worker identity, the only available option for survival, and her married woman identity. Sophie's moral sense of marriage, demonstrated by her initial violent repelling of Dhuri's sex-for-rice advances, can therefore be read as reflecting the initial harmony between her inner (personal) and outer (social) identities as a married woman in good times, which informs her inevitable identity crisis in bad ones. Her eventual decision to give in to Dhuri's sexual demands, evidently as an act of desperation for the sake of survival, thus makes moral her otherwise socially 'immoral' conduct. A quotation from the text where Sophie describes her feelings about the sex-for-rice encounter

8. Gender roles in patriarchal Zimbabwean societies are often based on the centralisation of power on male breadwinners. Owomoyela (2002:90) has ably noted some of the major reasons for women's low status in Zimbabwe, and he argues: '... women's inferior status was attributed to several factors: the gift men present to the parents of their brides as part of the marriage arrangement (lobola); marriage systems whereby women leave their homes and become part of their husbands' families; men's ownership and control of land and other means of production ...'



with Dhuri illuminates the paradox of 'moral' immorality (Phiri 2010):

I was in a very difficult situation. Losing both the money and the commodities would drive me crazy. I had to make up my mind quickly ... I was very angry with myself for giving in. I thought of my husband and children. What I was about to do was a shameful thing, I was betraying my family. I was angry with Dhuri for taking advantage of me ... he [*Dhuri*] was so sarcastic I would have kicked him ... we spent most of the time arguing about protection. Dhuri had said he did not believe in condoms and that AIDS did not exist. I said totally the opposite. In the end we carried on without protection ... I felt rotten and dirty about what we had done. (p. 19)

In this description, the context in which Sophie loses her, socially defined, sexual morality cognitively chaperons us to positively understand her new public, sex worker, identity outside of the dominant socio-cultural constructions of moral behaviour. We are led to perceive Sophie's being made immoral as paradoxically an act of desperation on behalf of her family. In fact, the descriptions subtly explain, in an affective style, the complexity of her emergent identity as it is shaped by social and economic forces the pressing and conflicting demands of which result in her split identity. The disclosive and explanatory facet of Sophie's descriptions of her sexual encounter as a sex worker demonstrates what Seyla Benhabib calls '... the redemptive power of narrative' (in Lara 1998:37). Sophie's description of her first sex selling act above emphasises her reluctance in a way that hints at her conscience even as she eventually sleeps with Dhuri because of desperation. This power of the narrative to reveal and justify Sophie's reasons for selling sex is heightened throughout the novel by the autobiographically styled self-narration which reveals Sophie's personal struggle to reconcile her inner-wife self with the socially 'deviant' yet economically imperative sex worker identity.

The sympathy with which readers are likely to read Sophie's involvement in sex work is intensified by the realisation that not only is she not responsible for her tragic situation but also that her male clients are part and the beneficiaries of the patriarchal socio-economic order that debauches her. A description of one of the near-fatal moments in Sophie's sex selling can best illustrate how Phiri deploys affect to celebrate the sacrifices of the female sex worker. Simultaneously, she questions a patriarchal social order that hypocritically preaches women's sexual morality premised on commitment to a man whilst exposing women to sexual exploitation by men. A quotation of one of these moments is necessary:

I climbed into the car, not trusting the man. His dark glasses made me uncomfortable. It seemed like he didn't want to talk, so I zipped my mouth ... He offered to pay two hundred rands but was not prepared to use protection. In the end I gave in, I desperately needed money ...

Whenever I heard the sound of a truck, I ran to hide. I was not interested in truck drivers. They knew too much about me. By the second week, I had managed to earn enough money to pay school fees and buy groceries. I was yet to earn some more for the stand and my mother-in-law's medication. (Phiri 2010:99)

The two paragraphs aesthetically deploy three connected leitmotifs of fear shown by Sophie's reluctance to entertain Peter's offer for her services, a suppressed sense of shame revealed by her attempts to hide from truck drivers and an unwavering conscience which informs her priority list for spending her money. These leitmotifs affectively put the spotlight on the wretched situation in which Sophie's desperate sex sale occurs. As hinted above, the situation is marked by the precarious nature Sophie's material and psychological conditions which informs her constantly split personality. Inscribed in this desperation is a subtle exposure of fault-lines in normative constructions of the female sex worker. This normative perception is inherently patriarchal. It is informed by a phallogocentric reconstruction of female chastity as involving the surrender of female sexuality to male control. Whilst Sophie's turning to sex work may not be viewed as liberating, it can be read as unsettling the patriarchal codes that are guiding the social and sexual identities which construct Sophie's sexual morality as founded on her commitment to Steven. However, as can be discerned from the quotation above, Sophie's experiences and own understanding of sex work reconstructs the profession as a risky occupation. There are two forms of fear connected to this risk. Firstly, and more apparent is the fear of physical violence perpetrated by her male clients and also by rival female sex workers. In the chapter 'Sink or swim', Sophie relates a gruesome rape by Peter, a prospective male client who is best-known for 'terroris[ing] women' (Phiri 2010:105). Peter also robs her and derogatively calls her a 'stupid cow' (Phiri 2010:104). In the chapter 'Tough going', Sophie is verbally, and nearly physically, assaulted by a group of young female sex workers who spitefully call her 'a bitch' (Phiri 2010:135) and an 'old cow' (Phiri 2010:136).

A second and more subtle expression of Sophie's fear is psychological in nature: It involves the conflict between Sophie's two selves, namely her sex worker self and her inner, conscientious self which abhors the occupation. The second paragraph of the quotation above foregrounds Sophie's fear of being 'known' (read 'exposed') to reflect critically on the impact of her two warring selves on her mental health. This mental dilemma haunts Sophie's very existence from her very first act of desperate sex selling. In her subsequent sexual encounters with various clients, Sophie feels 'angry with [*her*]self' (Phiri 2010:19), 'rotten and dirty' (Phiri 2010:19), 'guilty' (Phiri 2010:99) and 'awful' (Phiri 2010:87). Underlying these personal reflections on her sex work is an inherent sense of morality which informs her sense of shame. However, the shame is destabilised by the nobility of Sophie's achievements: She earns a living for the family, sends her children to school, purchases a residential stand and buys her mother-in-law's medication. Whilst these significant victories do not in any way signal female liberation or emancipation because men such as Sophie's husband and her clientele still financially and sexually exploit her, they do portray Sophie's sacrifice to brave the fear of stigma and HIV and AIDS as a highly qualified form of female empowerment.



## The 'home wrecker' as a homemaker

Invoking the traditionally ingrained identification of prostitutes as home wreckers, Anna Chitando (2011) argues that the dominant images of prostitutes in Zimbabwe's patriarchal discourses are inherently negative. In her analysis of *Desperate* (Phiri's other prostitute-centred literary text), Chitando (2011:53) infers that Phiri 'give[s] a voice to sex workers' to challenge the narrow patriarchal conceptions of sex work. Chitando (2011) argues that the Shona terms for sex workers, *pfambi* and *hure*, are 'totally negative' because they carry connotations of immorality and aberrant behaviour. According to this logic, the prostitute is a deviant woman undeserving of respect, existing in opposition to celebrated patriarchal womanhood best defined by the Shona proverb '*musha mukadzi*' (literally translating into 'a home is a woman'). Chitando (2011) concludes that *Desperate* proffers a platform for female (prostitute) subjectivities that '... subvert patriarchy and create new and positive identities as expressing positive agency'. Like *Desperate*, *Highway queen* attempts to de-stigmatise sex work by, as Chitando observes in relation to *Desperate*, inversely identifying society as the danger to sex workers rather than orthodox conceptions of sex workers as a danger to society. In *Highway queen*, the 'prostitute discourse' creates a dialectic of prostitute identification whereby the female prostitute acquires agency to redefine morality. Thus the dominant image of prostitution reflected in the character of Sophie is not only anti-essentialist, but more importantly, it 'tailored' to evoke prostitution, in Sophie's extraordinary context, as a justifiable means of earning a living. Sophie's consciousness of the stigma attached to prostitution – her awareness that she is earning 'dirty money' (Phiri 2010:89) – is constantly dispelled by our sympathetic appreciation of her desperation, which is buttressed by her declaration that her body is '... the only commodity that no one had control over except [her]self' (Phiri 2010:88). Each time Sophie sells sex, her sense of regret and 'ang[er] with [her]self' (Phiri 2010:86) is outweighed by her sense of achievement. This is revealed, for instance, in Sophie's reaction to a constantly nagging fear that some of her male clients could have infected her with HIV. She says:

No one suspected how I earned money ... the money that I earned gave me security and hope. I was able to resume payment of stand instalments. My family was never short of food. School fees were paid in time. As things got harder, most families struggled. I was lucky that I was managing, even though the money was not clean. (Phiri 2010:89)

Although Sophie manages to conceal her prostitute self from her family and close friends throughout the novel by practising away from home, her constantly guilty conscience, informed by her awareness of the 'uncleanliness' of the money, mars her own sense of achievement. However, the 'dirt' in the money that she earns through sex work is sanitised through her story's affective impact, which nudges us to recognise sympathetically the pressing circumstances behind her desperate tenacity in 'disidentifying' (Bell 1994:14). Yet Sophie's 'disidentification' (Bell 1994) is apparently incomplete, that is, she never reaches a stage

where she successfully sheds her guilty conscience and publicly displays her prostitute identity. In fact, despite her successes as a breadwinner, her situation is essentially tragic. It comes at the cost of her moral beliefs and her mental and physical health (she realises towards the end of the novel that she is HIV-positive). However, it can be argued that Sophie's exposure as an inexperienced, vulnerable and desperate breadwinner – the source of her trouble – indicates the hypocrisy of a patriarchal society that subordinates and denounce her on moral grounds yet exploits her sexually, through her male clients, and financially, through Steven).

*Highway queen's* styling as an autobiographical prostitute narrative can be linked to Lara's (1998:26) theorisation on '... the role of experience in morality in the construction of a moral identity'. Lara (1998:59) contends that, when women's personal experiences come to the public domain, they not only represent the experiencing subject's desire for recognition but, more importantly, '... allow them to adopt the viewpoint of moral subjects challenging a narrow conception of justice'. Notably, Phiri seems less interested in the politics of the decriminalisation of prostitution than she is keen to de-mythologise the blanket immoralisation of sex work in dominant social, cultural and religious constructions made without due regard to the underlying patriarchal forces informing its practice. Beyond the novel's 'counter-identification' effect – its problematisation and rejection of narrow perceptions of sex workers and sex work in dominant socio-cultural discourses – the text, through its prostitute narrative style, lends the prostitute narrator authenticity and agency to articulate her experiences convincingly and even appealingly. The novel's first-person narrative gives Sophie agency and space to reveal not only how an initially inadvertent and once-off sex-for-basic commodities act ends up being her only viable means of survival. More importantly, it reveals the sacrifices attendant on surviving with a dichotomous identity – a constant contradictory relationship between her conscientious self and her expedient reluctant sex worker self. It is this conscience that Sophie remarkably sustains throughout the novel that invites our admiration and, adjunct to that, a revision of previous misrecognitions of sex workers. This is how, for instance, Sophie describes and reflects on a sex sale encounter with a young and inexperienced client she forces to use protection in order to avoid HIV infection:

Afterwards it was evident that he had never bought sex before. He was too grateful. The poor guy might have been clean but I was HIV positive. I didn't want to spread the virus. Others were bitter. They spread it intentionally. I felt guilty about the times that I had given in to no protection because of more money. Steven (Sophie's client) slept like a log but I couldn't sleep. I was thinking of my husband lying in a hospital bed, in pain. (Phiri 2010:131)

In this quotation, the tension in Sophie's double identity is clear. It not only reveals Sophie's reluctance in taking up sex work as a means of survival, but perhaps





more importantly, it affects us to recognise her intact conscience in spite of economic and gendered odds that force her to survive by means of a practice that she abhors. Underlying her commitment to work is a strong sense of responsibility towards her family and also towards Steven (her client) whom she protects from the HIV virus in her system. Sophie is here demonstrating the possibility of maintaining a high level of moral integrity even though she is a sex worker. Her reference to 'others' (fellow sex workers) who casually spread HIV suggests her difference. It is this sense of difference which problematises prior blanket conceptions of sex work and sex workers, demanding instead individual consideration of motivations for selling sex.

One way in which Sophie's subjectivity presents a discursive space for the revision of prior, dominant and narrow conceptions of sex work and sex workers is through her constant exposure of patriarchy through the inadequacies of her husband (Steven). Beyond spotlighting flawed patriarchally defined gender roles which disadvantage women, Phiri's evocation of Steven's abrogation of familial duty is such that it not only validates Sophie's taking over the breadwinning role, but more importantly, it sanitises the 'immoral' dimension of her means, sex work, of improvising in that role. From the moment he loses his job, every reference to Steven not only reveals his emasculation as epitomised by his total dependence on Sophie – a woman who is culturally expected to be his dependant<sup>9</sup> – but reveals the familial lacuna that Sophie is forced to fill under very difficult economic conditions. Steven's constant appearance as an impediment in Sophie's narrative of the family's daily struggle for survival is an overt and biased narrative tactic that serves to underscore the difficult odds against which Sophie's new role plays out, consequently enlisting the reader to sympathise with her desperate choice of taking up sex work. Steven's boozing, we are told, 'breaks his mother's heart' (Phiri 2010:10). Ironically, Sophie's understanding of Steven's drinking is steeped in traditional codes defining familial gender roles and manhood. These are the patriarchally constructed codes that Sophie must disrupt to survive. She says the following of Steven's booze problem:

... his drinking was a clear indication of frustration. If a man failed to provide for his family, he became ashamed. That is what my father preached at home when we were growing up. (Phiri 2010:10)

In light of this, Steven's abdication from the breadwinning role is thus a 'wake up call', the title of the first chapter of the novel (Phiri 2010:7), for Sophie – not only in her traditional role as a subordinate dependent on Steven in normal times but, more importantly, in her misplaced trust in conventional means of earning a living in a crisis situation. The last time Steven appears in the novel, he is

9. My reading of Steven's emasculation takes into consideration the patriarchal culture's identification of manhood with the breadwinning role. Sophie alludes to this gender-role configuration when she infers that Steven's drinking problem 'was a clear indication of frustration' (Phiri 2010:10) with his failure to keep up with his assigned breadwinning role.

totally dependent on Sophie. One of his legs is amputated after he injured himself in a drunken stupor, and his AIDS condition is deteriorating because of his recklessness. As the novel ends, Sophie, unlike her husband who is succumbing to AIDS, is managing her HIV condition well and taking up a voluntary HIV and AIDS campaign for fellow sex workers. Steven's eventual relocation to the rural areas with his mother and children, when construed in the context of Sophie's remaining in town to 'work', allows a symbolic reading of the problematisation of traditional gender roles and identities.<sup>10</sup>

## Conclusion

In her interview with Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro (2013), Phiri iterates that '... it's unfortunate that these women [*sex workers*] are not being acknowledged and nobody wants to know them'. This article has revealed how *Highway queen* goes beyond merely 'introducing' sex workers to destabilise dominant, patriarchally shaped conceptions of sex workers and sex work, particularly in the context of a national economic crisis. The novel foregrounds symbolic events such as Steven's retrenchment and his subsequent incapacitation to provide for his family, Sophie's ill-fated socially 'acceptable' business ventures that lead her into sex work and her violent encounters with some of her clients and rape by potential clients in order to inscribe her sacrifice to take up sex work as a desperate means of survival with a cognitively affective moral flair. Our emotional closeness to and admiration for Sophie informed inter alia by these events and circumstances and their narration through the first-person narrative not only influence us to recognise her strong character, sense of responsibility and sacrifice, but it also moves us to recognise the injustice of dominant and often negative conceptions of female sex work and female sex workers. *Highway queen* emerges as a feminist novel whose styling as a prostitute narrative makes the story more personal, subjective and iconoclastic. The agency unconsciously acquired by the prostitute heroine as she reluctantly 'disidentifies' (Bell 1994:14) with patriarchal norms of morality simultaneously spotlights the psychological harm that sex work inflicts on its indisposed female practitioner whilst justifying Sophie's desperate sex work as commensurate with her entrapment. Although the fear of stigma haunts Sophie's conscience throughout the novel, compelling her to conceal her prostitute identity, prostitution as described and explained by its practitioner, epitomised by her particular practice, acquires a cleaner and even moral image.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

10. I am thinking about the colonial gender-based mobility trends in which black men were attracted, and even forced, by the emergent economic and political regime to take up employment in industrialised urban areas, leaving their female dependants and children in the rural areas.



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